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ABSTRACT

A study of 60 adults, ages 23-38, was done to assess the fit of life-stages (periods during which adults of similar age face common problems, events, pressures, situations) identified by writers in adult development for these ages. Focus was on (1) creating a structured interview schedule to obtain data which should be age-related and (2) creating a system by which judges were trained to identify life-stages and to apply that identification scheme. The life-stages included for study were (1) Leaving the Family (late teens-early twenties), (2) Provisional Adulthood (early twenties-late twenties), (3) Age 30 Transition (late twenties-early thirties), (4) Settling Down (early thirties-late thirties) and (5) Mid-Life Transition (late thirties-early forties). Twenty middle-class individuals (9 men and 11 women) from each of three age groups, 23-27, 29-32, 34-38, were interviewed in taped sessions designed to elicit in-depth responses regarding occupation, leisure, and relationships. Evaluating the presence or absence of various characteristics, two raters for each interview distributed 100 percentage points among scales representing the life-stages. Interrater correlations, means and standard deviations of the life-stage ratings by age group, and analysis of variance of group differences were computed. It was concluded that with training in life-stages descriptions, individuals can classify subjects into life stages with reasonable accuracy. The results suggest that life-stages do not fit completely for the individuals studied, with the fit being poorest at Age 30 Transition, but that life-stages are reliably associated with differences between age groups. (EM)

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THE FIT OF LIFE-STAGES TO ADULTS AGES 23-38

by

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Introduction

Adult development is increasingly being viewed as an interactive process between the adult and his/her environment, a process based as much on life events and circumstances as on aging. Writers on adult development (Gould, 1972; Levinson et al., 1976; Sheehy, 1976; and Vaillant and McArthur, 1972) have noted phases, periods, stages, or life cycles during which adults similar in age seem to face common problems, events, pressures, and situations. These "life-stages" have been derived through the use of interview and questionnaire techniques; content analysis of individual interviews was the most frequently used method of data analysis. The present study focussed on (1) creating a structured interview schedule to obtain data which should, according to previous writers, be age-related and (2) creating a system by which judges were trained to identify life-stages and to apply that identification scheme.

This research is concerned with the life-stages tentatively identified for adults ages 23-38. The life-stage of Provisional Adulthood (for those in their early twenties to late twenties) is one in which the person is making initial (and sometimes tentative) commitments to adult roles and responsibilities in both occupational and interpersonal contexts. The life-stage of Age 30 Transition (the late twenties and early thirties) is one in which the focus is on the questioning of one's self and one's relationships as defined in the preceding life-stage. For example, the question may be asked, "Now that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing is it really what I want to be doing?". The Settling Down life-stage (the early thirties to the late thirties) focuses on the deeper commitments that are made as the person invests more in work, family, and valued interests. Immediately preceding the three life-stages just described is the Leaving the Family life-stage (the late teens and early twenties) which centers on the separation from the family,

including the reduction of dependence on familial support and authority, and the redefinition of one's self as an adult. Immediately following those life-stages described above is the Mid-Life Transition life-stage (the late thirties and early forties) which includes the reexamination of the earlier dreams of life, the beginning of the time squeeze in life, the feeling of bodily decline, the reduction of differences between masculine and feminine personality characteristics, and the increasing concern for future generations. Leaving the Family and Mid-Life Transition life-stages were also included in this research so that any general tendency toward early or late development in the sample studied could be detected. The fit of these life-stages to a sample of adults ages 23-38 was assessed in this study.

Methodology

An interview schedule was designed to elicit in-depth responses in the areas of occupation, leisure, and relationships to friends, family of origin, spouse, children, and self.

Twenty middle-class individuals (9 men and 11 women) were selected for each of three age groups: ages 23-27, ages 29-32, and ages 34-38.[1] According to the life-stages writers, these groups should be representative of Provisional Adulthood, Age Thirty Transition, and Settling Down life-stages, respectively. The sixty subjects were well-educated (only 13% did not have college degrees) and had adequate incomes (63% earned over $15,000 annually and 65% owned their own homes). The marital status of the sample included 25% who had never married; 52% who were in their first marriages; 8%, separated; 10%, remarried; and 5%, divorced. Fifty-seven percent had children.

The sixty subjects were suggested by friends and colleagues of the researchers. The subjects were contacted by telephone and invited to participate in a study of young adults. They were interviewed individually by the first author at a time and place convenient to them. Interviews were tape-recorded

and lasted from 45 minutes to three hours (the mode was 75 minutes). In addition, biographical data on each subject was gathered through the use of a short questionnaire.

A rating procedure was developed to identify the life-stage(s) of the subject from the information presented in the tape-recorded interview. The training of raters included reading articles on life-stages, discussing the characteristics of life-stages, passing an objective test on life-stages developed for this research, and rating at least one practice tape for life-stage classification. A copy of the scales used appears in Figure 1.

Tape # _____ Date _____

Rater _____ Total time spent _____

Circle the hash mark that indicates your judgement of the "fit" of each life-stage to the interviewee. They should sum to 100%.

	100%	90	80	70	60	50	40	30	20	10	0%
Leaving the Family	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Provisional Adulthood	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Age 30 Transition	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Settling Down While Moving Up	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Mid-life Transition	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
No Stage is Indicated	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
	100%	90	80	70	60	50	40	30	20	10	0%

Please explain your ratings according to the life-stage theory:

Figure 1. The Life-Stages Classification Scales

The first author and at least one other trained individual rated each taped interview independently. A total of six raters plus the first author participated in the analysis of the tapes. A procedure was used to ensure that the raters (other than the first author) were not acquainted with the subjects. Raters identified the presence or absence of "characteristics" of adults (this procedure and results will be reported in other research reports). The percentage of agreement between raters on the characteristics was calculated for each interview. If the percentage of agreement across all items was less than 75%, a third person trained in the use of the scales rated the tape. In two cases, this third rating was not possible due to the likelihood that the raters knew the interviewee.

Based on the presence or absence of various life-stage characteristics, raters distributed a total of 100 percentage points among scales representing the life-stages; they identified for each subject the percentage they believed reflected the fit of each life-stage with 0% indicating that the subject had none of the characteristics of the life-stage and 100% indicating that the subject had all the characteristics of the life-stage (and none of the characteristics of any other life-stage). Six scales were used: five represented the life-stages of Leaving the Family, Provisional Adulthood, Age Thirty Transition, Settling Down, and Mid-Life Transition. Five life-stages were used rather than the three one would expect for the ages 23-38 to allow for subjects who began or ended a life-stage at ages slightly at variance with the hypothesized life-stage ages. Percentage points were assigned to a sixth scale, the No Stage scale, to the extent that the rater believed that subject's responses were inconsistent with alternatives offered by the life-stages descriptions (e.g., a marriage that was neither highly valued nor constraining).

To obtain a rating which would be more accurate than any single individual's rating, the raters had negotiation sessions for each interview. These

negotiation sessions occurred from one hour to four weeks following the ratings of the tapes with the majority of negotiations occurring during the week following the rating. The "negotiated rating" was used in the data analysis.

Results

Interrater correlations between the first author and the first rater to classify the tape are reported in Table 1. The correlations for the three life-stage scales hypothesized for the age groups studied, i.e., Provisional Adulthood, Age Thirty Transition, and Settling Down, are higher than those for the other scales.

Table 1

Correlations Between the Ratings of the First Author And the First Rater on Each Life-Stage Scale (N = 60)

Life-Stage	Correlation
Leaving the Family	.45
Provisional Adulthood	.78
Age Thirty Transition	.66
Settling Down	.75
Mid-Life Transition	.17
No Stage	.20

No subject in any age group was judged as 100% reflective of any one life-stage. Of the sixty subjects interviewed, most (51/60) were rated in two or more life-stages. Considering individual's rating on the life-stage which the literature suggested as appropriate for their age group, only 14 cases were rated 70% or higher for the appropriate life-stage; ratings of 50% or higher were obtained in 30 cases.

The means and standard deviations of the life-stage ratings by age group are presented in Table 2 and the means are plotted in Figure 2.

The average score for those in the 23-27 age group on the Provisional Adulthood life-stage scale was 58%. The average score for individuals in the 29-32 age group on the Age Thirty Transition life-stage scale was 22%, with that age group averaging 35% on the Settling Down scale. The average score for the age group 34-38 on the Settling Down scale was 42%. Both the 23-27 and the 34-38 age groups had their highest average on the life-stage which would be hypothesized based on the literature; this was not the case for the 29-32 age group.

Table 2

Group Means and Standard Deviations for Age Groups

For Life-Stages Ratings (N = 60)

Life-Stage / Age Group	Leaving the Family	Provisional Adulthood	Age Thirty Transition	Settling Down	Mid-Life Transition	No Stage
23-27						
M	2.50	58.25	8.50	7.50	2.75	20.50
SD	4.73	16.00	8.90	13.03	4.44	9.45
29-32						
M	0.00	13.75	22.00	35.00	6.50	22.75
SD	0.00	13.75	20.86	22.06	7.63	12.40
34-38						
M	.25	6.50	22.75	42.25	13.75	14.50
SD	1.19	8.44	27.02	23.87	11.68	8.57

Analyses of variance of group differences are reported in Table 3. There is the least discrimination between age groups on the Age Thirty Transition scale and the most on the Provisional Adulthood scale. The F-statistic for Age Thirty Transition is 3.10, while for Provisional Adulthood and Settling Down, they are 91.22 and 16.44, respectively. Considering the Provisional Adulthood, Age Thirty Transition, and Settling Down scales in terms of the results reported in Tables 2 and 3, it is clear that most of the between group variation is due to the age 23-27 group being dissimilar to the 29-32

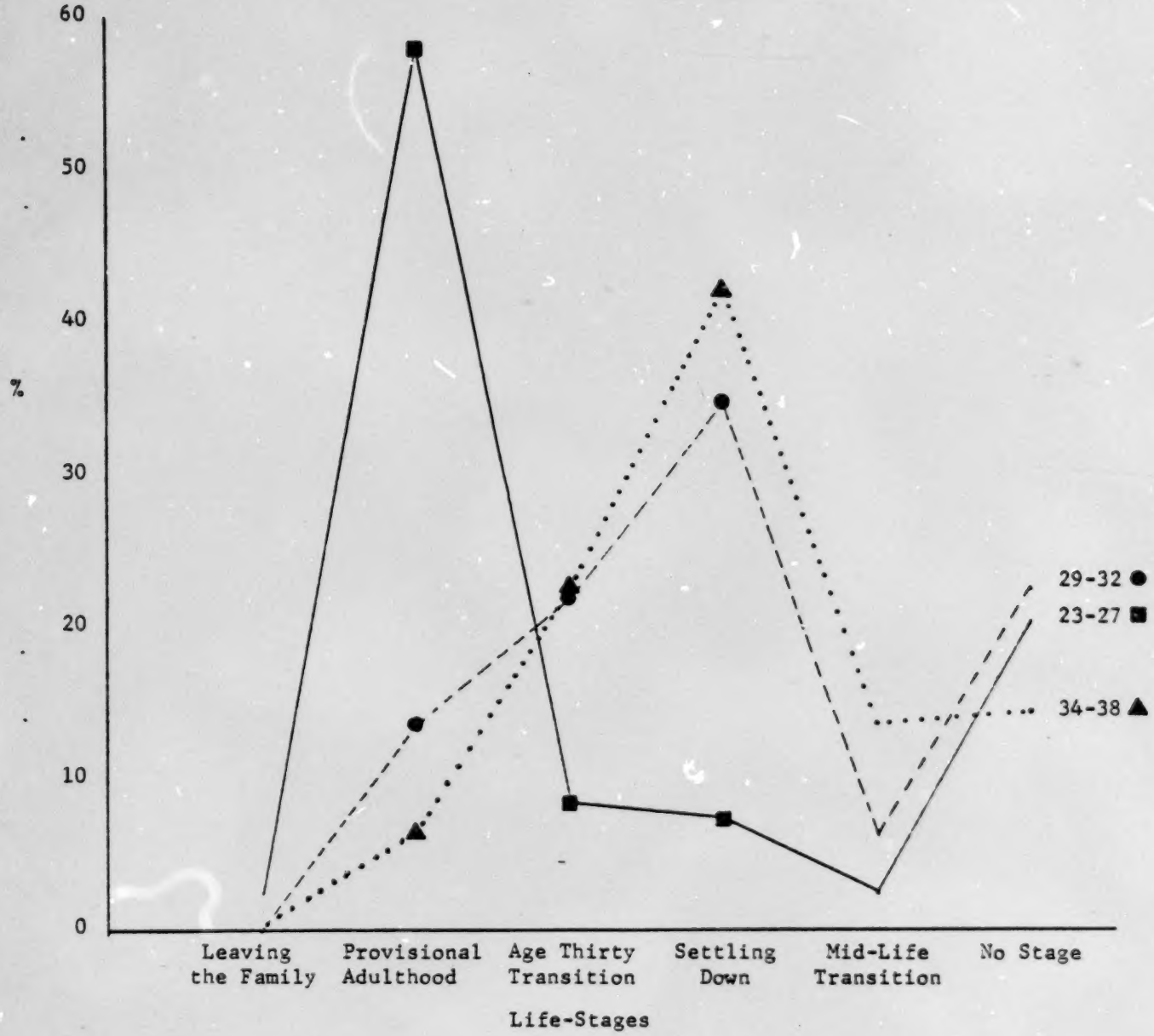

Figure 2: Age Group Means for Each Life-Stage Scale

and 34-38 age groups, with the 29-32 and 34-38 groups being more similar to each other. This pattern in the group means is clearly depicted in Figure 2.

Table 3

Analysis of Variance of Life-Stage Ratings

Life-Stage	MS Between*	MS Within**	F-Statistic	p-value
Leaving the Family	37.92	7.87	4.82	.012
Provisional Adulthood	15702.92	172.15	91.22	.000
Age Thirty Transition	1286.25	414.89	3.10	.053
Settling Down	6721.25	408.75	16.44	.000
Mid-Life Transition	625.42	71.45	8.75	.000
No Stage	363.75	105.50	3.45	.039

* Degrees of Freedom = 2 ** Degrees of Freedom = 57

Discussion

It seems that with training in life-stages descriptions, individuals can classify subjects into life-stages with reasonable accuracy. Interrater correlations for the life-stage scales of primary interest, Provisional Adulthood, Age Thirty Transition, and Settling Down, were acceptably high, especially considering the newness of the procedures. The lower correlations for the other scales were due perhaps to the presence of more extraneous (not life-stage related) variation, since these scales would not be appropriate, according to the literature, for the ages studied here.

This study suggests that life-stages do not fit completely for the individuals studied. The fit was the "poorest" at the Age Thirty Transition life-stage; perhaps these individuals had already passed through that life-stage or had not yet reached it. Or this life-stage can possibly be skipped. A transitional life-stage may be a shorter one and be harder to find in a cross-sectional study such as this one.

While life-stages do not completely fit for the age groups studied, they nevertheless are reliably associated with differences between age groups. It appears, based on this research, that information collected in the interviews forms into patterns which cause raters to perceive the age groups differently.

One should not assume, however, that just because an individual is in a particular age group he/she possesses particular life-stage characteristics. It may be more fruitful to look at probabilities of possessing particular characteristics, thus avoiding the "all or nothing" stance the life-stages seem to imply with regard to descriptive characteristics.

The life-stages area of study is a new one much in need of rigorous research, and as Brim (1976) cautions, "...there is a danger of our using this facile scheme [life-stages] as a cover for loose thinking about human development, without carrying forward the necessary hard-headed analyses of the evidence (p. 8)." The authors concur.[2]

Footnotes:

[1] In order to increase the likelihood of rating "pure types", data was not collected on individuals whose ages were at the age limits of the life-stages. Thus data was not collected on individuals ages 28 and 33.

[2] In an attempt to make the study of life-stages more objective, a self-report questionnaire derived from the literature and the 60 interviews reported above is being developed to identify life-stage characteristics. This questionnaire is in the pilot study phase and will eventually be administered to 120 subjects. In addition, the 60 individuals whose interviews were studied in this research will be administered the questionnaire.

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